

Message to All Saints' 24. 1. 2021.

Dear Church Congregation, Choir, and others who like to read these messages/reflections.

The news is very mixed. On the one hand the vaccine rollout is progressing apace, which is very encouraging. On the other hand, it seems that new variants of Covid 19, may be more aggressive than the original strain.

We have to try and remain optimistic, and hope that later this year we may find ourselves in a better place, and that services may once again be held safely in our church, especially over Easter.

The readings this week, under the heading from St John's, "Love Mercy", are from Nehemiah, Chapter 9. verses 29-31, and St John's Gospel, Chapter 8. Verses 1-11.

Nehemiah is extolling the quality of mercy expressed by God towards His recalcitrant children, in spite of the fact that they are continually disobeying Him. God never abandons His children. He is always ready to forgive those who return to Him. In God's eyes it is never too late for anyone to repent of their wrongdoing.

This was one of the most profound truths that Jesus brought to humankind, when He began His earthly ministry. In the reading from St John's Gospel the Scribes and Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus who had been arrested for committing adultery.

They hoped to trap Jesus when they asked Him whether she should be stoned to death according to the law of Moses. Jesus turned the tables on them by suggesting that if any of the accusers were without sin, then, they were entitled to cast the first stone. As they all retreated, one by one, Jesus was left alone with the woman. “Woman, has no-one condemned you?” He asked her. “No-one, Sir,” she answered. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared, adding the stipulation “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Forgiveness or mercy is one of the most important qualities we are enjoined to request in the only prayer that Jesus Himself taught us. Furthermore, he tells us that receiving forgiveness is contingent upon our forgiveness of wrongs done to us by others.

I am always amazed, and humbled, when I read about a parent forgiving the murderer, of their child, and doubt that I could ever bring myself to feel merciful in such circumstances.

When we talk about divine forgiveness, the amazing example of Christ’s prayer, as he was being nailed to the cross, is never far from our minds. “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

I often think that some of the most extraordinary examples of forgiveness were shown by some of the Jews at the time of the Holocaust.

Viktor Frankel's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, is a truly revelatory account of his time in Auschwitz, and he describes how a surprising number of people were able to transcend the inhumanity, deprivation, horror and the perpetual threat of death.

One of the prisoners wrote, "We come to the moment, Lord, when we say, 'We cannot go on, we have reached the end, we cannot face another day, another hour.' And then the will returns, just a little, 'One more try,' we say, 'One more day.' And we know that You have met us and taken some of the burden on to Yourself."

A Dutch lady called Corrie Ten Boom, was imprisoned in a concentration camp with her older sister. She wrote the following prayer about forgiveness: 'Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hate. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness. He who cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.'

Someone commented that they had realised a strange thing: when they talked to older people they noticed that their fondest recollections are often associated with difficult times. There is a theory that is supported by Helen Keller, the deaf and blind woman who in spite of her considerable handicaps, became an author and inspirational speaker. She wrote, "The world is full of suffering. It is also full of the overcoming of it."

It is doubtful that we remember the actual times with much fondness, but it is likely that we found during those hard times a sense of everyone pulling together and a shared purpose and a kindness that came with the difficulties.

That is surely what many have experienced during these recent months. It has been a time of worry, stress and uncertainty. And for far too many it has been a time of bereavement and unbearable loss.

For those of you who have experienced the loss of loved ones or know friends who have had such an experience, I should like to offer a remarkable piece, which I can relate to. It may not be to everyone's taste but I feel I must share it, in case it resonates with anyone else as it did with me.

It is by Leslie Weatherhead, a Christian theologian and Minister. It is taken from his book: 'The Christian Agnostic', and entitled 'Unseen Helpers':

"The last words one of my sisters spoke to me as she lay dying were, 'I am sure I shall be able to help you from the other side.' All I can say is that someone unseen has continually helped me, not least when I have been trying to write a letter, an article, or a sermon or a book to help others.

To what extent a sermon is partly made "on the other side" it is impossible to say. And why is one so consciously guided at times to make a visit, or to write a letter or to send a book? Who sent that woman last night fifty miles to ask me a question the answer to which set her mind at rest?

Why did that particular man make that particular journey to attend that particular service at which, all unknown to him beforehand, his particular problem was dealt with?

I must not enlarge on this, but again and again I have suddenly written down the name of one of my people and felt I had to visit his home, only to find he was in some special need.

Again and again, while preaching I have altered the sermon or an illustration in it, only to find the alteration was relevant to the need of a previously unknown listener. My own solution of the mystery is that unknown friends in the unseen, who see “with larger, other eyes than ours”, convey to one the need they see.”

To conclude, a prayer for Forgiveness:

Heavenly Father,

You have taught us through Your Son, that if we do not forgive others, we cannot receive Your Forgiveness.

Make us merciful in our dealings with those who do us wrong, as we recall how mercifully you have dealt with us; that forgiven much, we may forgive much, for the sake of Him who died that we might be forgiven, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

May you all find peace, and may you receive many blessings in spite of the difficult times we are living in.

My love to you all, Sarah.

